

## LEARNING FROM BIBLE PARABLES

Lynn Gardner

Jesus was a master of the art of storytelling. His illustrations from everyday life captured the attention of the common people. The parables of Jesus constitute more than one-third of our Lord's recorded teaching. It is imperative that we understand what Jesus meant to teach through His parables.

### WHAT IS A PARABLE?

The word *parable* literally means something thrown along side of something else. This is done for the purpose of comparison. A parable is a true-to-life illustration used as a comparison to teach a spiritual or moral lesson.

The child's definition is true. "A parable is an earthly story

with a heavenly meaning." It is something drawn from nature or from everyday experience to illustrate a spiritual truth.

It usually is a narrative based on true history or fictitious true-to-life experience. Jesus' parables have a natural freshness and reality because they were drawn from everyday life. A parable differs from a fable because in a fable living qualities are given to things and human qualities are given to animals.

In English literature the parable as a figure of speech is limited to stories as a literary form. However, some figures of speech in the Bible which are called parables are not stories. The command in Luke 4:23 "Physician, heal yourself" is called a parable in the original language. In our literary classifications this would be called a proverb. Some parables were in the form of simple statements, "The laborer deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7). See also Matthew 5:14; 15:14 and Mark 7:15-17. Others were expressed through questions, "You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?" (Matt. 7:16). Mark 9:50 is another use of question. Mark 2:21 is a statement and an explanation, "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made." Sometimes Jesus introduced a parable by the typical rabbinic opening "To what shall I liken this . . ." (Matt. 11:16; Luke 13:18-21).

Most of Jesus' parables are found in Matthew and Luke's Gospels. John does not use the word *parable*. We have recorded about thirty of Jesus' story-parables. Including other figures of speech called parables the number in Jesus' teaching would be about sixty.

### WHY DID JESUS TEACH IN PARABLES?

1. *To Attract Interest.* People enjoy listening to a story or an illustration. This is especially true when the subject or object is familiar to their experience. "The common people heard him

gladly" (Mark 12:37) because He spoke about things common in their experience: fish nets, sower, dough, housecleaning, mustard seeds, darnels in the wheat, wandering sheep and faithful shepherds, weather signs in the clouds and the direction of the wind, budding fig trees, plowmen with eyes fixed straight ahead, laborers harvesting, and wayward sons.

A college speech professor affirmed that the most important rule for successful public speaking was to have one good illustration for every main point. Messages or lessons without illustrations are like rooms without windows — they do not let in much light. Jesus used deft illustrations to make truth interesting and exciting. We must follow His example if we want to be good communicators.

2. *To Reveal Truth.* Statements involving abstract reasoning are not easily grasped. A good story or example can make the same truth clear and understandable. In order to teach a truth one must compare the unknown with the known. A parable provides a bridge from the island of experience to the unknown truth. As an eggshell carries the yoke and egg white so a story can be the vehicle of communication to carry a thought or idea from the mind of the speaker to the mind of the listener.

Jesus taught in parables to communicate basic spiritual truths. A poet has said:

Where truth in closest words shall fail,  
When truth embodied in a tale  
May enter in at lowly doors.

Difficult concepts can be expressed clearly through good illustrations.

3. *To Conceal Truth.* A British writer, P.G. Wodehouse, has been quoted as saying, "A parable is one of those stories in the Bible which sounds at first like a pleasant yarn but keeps something up its sleeve which pops out and leaves you flat" (A.M. Hunter, *Interpreting Parables*, Westminster, 1976, p. 14).

A parable can present a truth to the mind and secure assent to that truth before the point is applied. A parable can be a precious gem of tactful reproof. This can be seen in the parable Nathan told to David after he had committed adultery with Uriah's wife. A rich man stole the only lamb his poor neighbor owned and served it to a visiting traveler. David indignantly decided that the thief should die. Nathan drove home his point, "You are the man!" (II Sam. 12:7).

William Barclay observed that a parable "conceals truth from those who are either too lazy to think or too blind by prejudice to see . . . . The parable *reveals* truth to him who desires truth; it *conceals* truth from him who does not wish to see the truth" (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. II, Westminster, 1958, p. 62). Whether a parable reveals or conceals truth depends upon the state of the mind and heart of the hearer. William Taylor observed,

The man who saw in the story nothing but a story, would turn away from it as trifling and unimportant . . . the parables served to sift and purge the throng of Christ's hearers. They tested character, while they symbolized truth" (*The Parables of Our Savior*, Hodder & Stoughton, pp. 11-14).

4. *To Make Truth Memorable.* It is almost always the illustrations from a sermon that people remember. Jesus took advantage of people's interest in stories. He made the point of the parable so clear that just to remember the story would recall the truth taught. His parables are among the most widely known of Jesus' teachings. William Barclay observed that a parable "enables and compels a man to discover truth for himself . . . . The parable, by compelling a man to draw his own conclusions and to do his own thinking, at one and the same time makes truth real to him and fixes it in his memory . . . . It made truth flash upon a man as the lightning suddenly illumines a pitch-dark night" (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. II, pp. 62-63). Parables were spoken and were meant more to be heard than

read. They had an immediate impact.

5. *To Persuade to Action.* A story touches the motives and emotions. This is essential to bring about an active response from the hearer. Jesus' parables often stab the conscience and call for a decision of the will.

### UNDERSTANDING PARABLES

Some glibly talk about the parables being clear and simple in the truth they express. In some cases this is true but several of the parables are difficult to understand. The parables of Jesus have suffered much misinterpretation through the centuries.

The parables were not idle stories but were designed to challenge the basic values of the hearers. They went against the grain of the traditional religious thinking of the day. Many of the parables are baffling because they go against common expectations. Sinners are commended: the publican, the prodigal and the unjust steward. Good people are reproved: the Pharisee and the elder brother. Common notions of who should be first and last, who should be rewarded are contradicted in the Wedding Feast, the Great Judgment and the Rich Man and Lazarus. Since they challenge the common notions on how God should act it is not surprising that Bible students often fail to see the truth Jesus intended to teach.

Because of a misunderstanding of Mark 4:10-12 some hold that only the inner circle of disciples could understand Jesus' parables. Jesus did expect His hearers to understand. In three cases Luke mentions that Jesus told parables to people (15:3; 18:9; 19:11) with the implication they were meant to be understood. The scholar of the law to whom Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan understood that parable (Luke 10:25-37). The chief priests and the Pharisees got the point in the Parable of the Tenants (Matt. 21:45). Jesus expected those to understand his parables who were willing to believe and to obey.

Our task is to hear and understand as Jesus expected them to be understood.

The following guidelines are given to aid in understanding the parables. Since the parables are not all one kind it is difficult to lay down rules applicable to each one. The following guidelines cover the story parables, but most of them will apply to the other types as well.

1. *Interpret as a Comparison Considering the Context.* The parable is a figure of comparison. Something in the earthly story is used to illustrate a spiritual truth. In an account of an historical fact each detail is true and may be significant in understanding the meaning of the event. But in a parable not every detail has significance.

One teacher said the Parable of the Sower taught that of those who heard the gospel only 25% would go to heaven. The parable illustrates the various responses people make to the gospel but it does not teach the percentage of hearers who will be saved. Some have explained the branches of the tree in the Parable of the Mustard Seed as denominations. This merely is part of the "scenery" of the parable illustrating that the kingdom grew from something small into something great (Matt. 13:31,32).

Allegorical interpretation attempts to make every detail have meaning. Augustine explained the Parable of the Good Samaritan in this way. The man beaten was Adam. Jerusalem was the heavenly city. Jericho signifies Adam's mortality. The thieves were the devil and his angels. They stripped Adam of his immortality and "beat him" forcing him to sin. The priest and the Levite were the Old Testament priesthood. The Samaritan was Christ. Christ restrained the man from sinning. Other identifications were: oil — comfort or good hope; wine — exhortation; beast — the flesh of Christ's incarnation; inn — the church; the morrow — after the resurrection; two pence — promise of this life and the life to come; innkeeper — Paul. This method of interpretation shows the cleverness of the interpreter but certainly

does not understand the parable as Jesus intended it to be understood.

A few of Jesus' teachings are more like allegories rather than parables, for example The Vine of John 15 and the Good Shepherd of John 10. An allegory is a collection of related metaphors. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is called by the name of another thing to suggest a resemblance. As an extended metaphor several points of comparison are intended in an allegory. However, a general rule for the study of parables is, "Look for the point of comparison that illustrates the one primary truth."

In seeking to understand a parable the reader should read the parable several times, seeking to hear the story as the original hearers heard it. Read the material before and after the parable to pick up clues as to its central meaning. Learning about the customs reflected in the parables can help one bridge the cultural gap and better grasp the point of the parable.

2. *Identify the Main Point of the Parable.* The historical occasion that gave rise to the parable may help the reader to identify the central point of emphasis. Jesus was invited to a Pharisee's home for dinner. Simon, the Pharisee, did not grant Jesus the common courtesies. A sinful woman washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. Simon objected that if Jesus were a prophet He would have known what sort of woman she was. Jesus told Simon a story about two debtors. One was forgiven a small debt, and the other was forgiven ten times as much. Jesus asked Simon which would love the creditor more. Simon answered the one he forgave more. Jesus then pointed out Simon's lack of kindness to Him in contrast to the woman's open appreciation. Jesus then said that because she had been forgiven much she loved much, but he who is forgiven little loves little (Luke 7:36-50). This Parable of the Two Debtors means so much more when it is understood in the light of its setting. Carefully study parables in the light of the situation in which it was given, and the subject it was meant to clarify or emphasize.

Look for any introductory comments that help one learn the central point. Luke 15:1-3 introduces the parables of the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep and the Prodigal Son with these words: "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable." The Parable of the Invitation to the Marriage Feast is introduced, "Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he marked how they chose the places of honor" (Luke 14:7). See also Luke 18:1 and 18:9.

Concluding comments often underscore and apply the main lesson of the parable. After the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). The Parable of the Unjust Steward is difficult to interpret but the best clue to the central lesson is in the application in Luke 16:8, "The master commended the dishonest steward for his shrewdness, for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light." Jesus did not praise him for his dishonesty. He was commended for using his present resources to plan for his future. Jesus applied the Parable of the Ten Virgins with this statement: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matt. 25:13), emphasizing the need for constant readiness for our Lord's return.

Sometimes clues to the central meaning can be found in the response of the hearers. In each parable be sure to look for the subject under discussion, when it was spoken and what event or teaching accompanies the parable.

3. *Observe and Use Whatever Explanation the Bible Gives.* Jesus did not always explain His parables. But when Jesus or an inspired writer explains or applies a parable, that is sufficient and final for a Bible student to understand the true meaning.

4. *Interpret in the Light of Other Scriptures.* Parallel parables often throw light on the meaning of a parable. By reading the



parallel explanations of the Parable of the Sower we gain a more complete list of the thorns that choke out the word in the heart of some hearers: "the cares of the world and the delight in riches" (Matt. 13:22); Mark adds "the desire for other things" (Mark 4:19); and Luke adds "pleasures of life" (Luke 8:14).

A parable should be studied in the light of other parables on the same subject. Often two or three parables are given to illustrate or enforce the same lesson. Luke 15 has three stories illustrating God's interest in the lost and his joy when the lost is found. The parables of the Hidden Treasure and of the Pearl of Great Price illustrate the same point (Matt. 13:44-46). So also the parables of the Mustard Seed and of the Leaven in the Meal help to interpret each other (Matt. 13:31-33). In studying the subject of the kingdom one should study the whole series of parables found in Matthew 13, Mark 4 and Luke 8.

Parables must be interpreted in the light of all the Bible's teaching on the subject. The Parable of the Tares (Matt. 13:24-30) in which the good and the bad are allowed to grow together until the end must not be used to negate the teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18:15-18 and I Corinthians 5. In the Parable of the Tares Jesus said the field is the world (Matt. 13:38), not the church. In this parable Jesus taught that both good and bad people are in the world and the final accounts will be settled in the judgment.

Beware of any doctrine based solely on a parable. Parables illustrate and illumine truth. They do not originate doctrine. Often people treat a parable as a predictive prophecy, when there is no reason to regard it as anything other than an illustrative picture.

One should not construct his whole doctrine of prayer from the Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8). The parable does not teach God's reluctance to answer our prayers. Rather it teaches us to be persistent in prayer and not quit praying.

Some of Jesus' parables qualify as among the world's most charming stories. Learning from Jesus' parables is a study well worth the effort.

## **Study Questions**

1. What is a parable?
2. What forms of language other than stories are called parables in the New Testament (Matt. 15:15; Mark 17:17; Luke 4:23; 6:39; John 10:6)?
3. List five reasons why Jesus taught in parables.
4. List ten things common to His hearers' experience that Jesus mentioned in His parables.
5. Explain how parables conceal truth from some and reveal it to others.
6. Why do stories motivate people to action?
7. Give Biblical evidence that Jesus meant for His parables to be understood.
8. List three guidelines for understanding parables.
9. Give an example of an allegorical misinterpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan.
10. Give several suggestions for finding the central point of a parable.
11. Discuss the relationship between parables and other teaching in Scripture.

## **Project**

Study the Parable of the Two Builders (Luke 6:46-49) by

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following the guidelines given in this lesson. State in one sentence the central truth in the parable. Then show how this truth applies to our lives. Prepare a lesson or devotion based on this parable.

